

The Egalitarianism of Honors at a Polytechnic University

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The Kellogg Honors College (KHC) is a distinctive community within Cal Poly Pomona (CPP), a public university in Southern California and one of twenty-three universities in the California State University (CSU) system. With over 22,000 students, CPP is the second-largest polytechnic university in the United States. Our university's goal is to provide a quality education that is accessible to California's general population. We are known for academic excellence, hands-on education, and affordable fees. Consequently, CPP is a destination for motivated and talented students from a diverse local population.

Honors students choose CPP instead of more elite, less accessible schools for a variety of reasons that include strong ties to the region, family responsibilities, and lack of financial resources. They come seeking opportunities and a better life, and they feel comfortable committing to an inclusive, diverse university that they have known about for much of their lives. The CPP student

body includes many first-generation college students, children of immigrant communities, some undocumented students, and many economically challenged but highly motivated learners.

At CPP, we hold egalitarian values dear. We interpret this ideal beyond equal opportunity for everyone; for us, an egalitarian education means providing the maximum opportunity and experience that we can, within our power and resources, for each student so that all can reach their full potential. Honors contributes to CPP's egalitarian ideal because the Kellogg Honors College provides the rich academic experiences that our high-potential, low-resource students deserve but could not access at more expensive schools.

The word "honors" often invokes ideas of exclusivity and meritocracy. This is an unfortunate misconception, far from the reality of honors education in general and especially for the Kellogg Honors College. Students are selected to honors by a separate application on the basis of the best we can determine of their potential, willingness to be challenged, growth mindset, and persistence. They may not have had a privileged educational background during their primary and secondary schooling, and sometimes this is reflected in quantitative measures such as lower GPAs and test scores. Instead of relying heavily on just these quantitative measures, we seek additional evidence of characteristics such as passion, determination, openness to new ideas, and aspiration to succeed in their essays and during the admission process. Although we would wish to provide this experience for everyone, and we surely miss some promising students, honors programs and colleges exist to do the best that a university can do within its means and limited resources.

CPP's motto is "learn by doing." At a polytechnic institution the distinctive hands-on training students receive stands out as a unique feature; employers and institutions value the many technical majors and applied fields a polytechnic university offers. Our graduates from colleges of engineering, hospitality management, business, agriculture, and environmental sciences are highly sought after. We also have excellent faculty in the humanities, the pure sciences, mathematics, the social sciences, and the liberal arts, which both serve their majors and provide essential nontechnical education to students in technical fields.

The culture of an honors education stresses the importance of being both well-trained and well-educated, an important goal for students at any university. The traditional departmentalization of disciplines often leads to students who are well-trained in their disciplines but not well-rounded, widely literate, or broadly informed. The values and philosophy that honors engenders

creates a synergy between these endeavors. Honors provides the framework and opportunity for a rich scholastic experience with its seminar-style classes, distinctive pedagogy, cohort of reflective, critical students, and physical space to grow as scholars among peers.

Honors students experience the best of both worlds, the enriching personalized experience of a small college and the numerous and varied opportunities only a large university can provide. Kellogg Honors College students start their first-year university experience with a three-day retreat prior to the beginning of classes, during which they ponder and discuss what it means to be well-trained, what it means to be well-educated, and how these concepts are linked. While sharing their thoughts and ideas, discussing and interpreting their common summer reading and spending social time, they form valuable bonds. For some, the exhilaration of engaging in intellectual discovery with fellow students is a new experience. It is fortunate that a specialized program like honors can encourage as well as provide the space, time, and structure for them to engage in intellectual discovery for themselves and with their peers.

No single characteristic distinguishes honors education. For some the intellectual habits formed become a way of life. Many discover through honors the joys of the life of the mind and find their intellectual home. They learn to appreciate that acknowledgement of our ignorance is as valuable as the surety of our knowledge. Most are yet too young to know the numerous ways these discoveries will enrich their lives and empower them in the years to come. Many honors students who had never heard of graduate school and some who imagined college as a faraway goal go on to PhD programs, law and medical school, well-paid positions of responsibility, and all manner of significant work and life experiences.

Our honors college makes an important contribution to our campus life as a whole in addition to serving the honors students. Participants serve in campus leadership roles and as student ambassadors on campus, and they represent the campus in an array of national, regional, and local competitions and events. Equally important is the benefit faculty and staff derive as a result of their engagement with these students in a multitude of academic and co-curricular activities.

The Kellogg Honors College is young, only in its eleventh year, but is already evincing the truth of anecdotal evidence that the influence of an honors education and mindset are felt throughout one's life, often with greater impact as one matures; this is the greatest value of honors, at any institution

but for sure at a polytechnic, where being well-trained is of utmost importance to the disciplines. Honors supplements and complements that excellent training, providing the structure and outlook to spur lifelong learning and self-realization, the true and full purpose for any university.

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